A Child's Story of American Literature

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month in and month out for reading matter of the "aristocratic" sort. Magazines would always start off with what looked like enthusiasm on the part of subscribers. You know how it is yourself if you have ever tried to get up anything. Plenty of people will promise to help you, but when it comes to actually lending a hand or putting one in their pockets it's another story. They usually melt away or turn a deaf ear to your appeals, and you must either manage the whole thing yourself or give it up. Some of the men who started magazines proved able to keep them going single handed for quite a while, but they all had to give up at last.

Yet, although we do not even remember their names now they were doing a gallant service. They were paying out their money, their time, their energy, their enthusiasm—all of which they might have put into something else more profitable to themselves—in order that you and I might have to-day what we call a national literature. For you must remember that their fervent enthusiasm for literature was not at all representative. If it had been their magazines would not have died of starvation. Even the appeal they made to patriotism was unavailing. "Disprove," they cried, "the British jeer that the Colonies when separated from England would become mere illiterate orang-utans! Show them that you have a taste for literature!"

But the majority of the people in America were little interested in reading. Most of those that were were satisfied with the newspaper. The average household did not own or care to own what we call a book. In spite of this, however, a competent observer wrote in the last year of the century: "I am satisfied that the ratio of intellect is as 20 to 1 and of knowledge as 100 to 1 in these States, compared with what they were before the American Revolution." Something had produced this great change. There is no fact of the time which is as likely to account for it as these plucky attempts at magazines. Short lived as they were and dead loss as they seemed to their overenthusiastic founders, they were laying the firm foundation for the literature that was to come. These nameless men, then, were doing the important literary work of the time.

Furthermore, it was a work unparalleled in the history of the literature of any other country. Such a thing as a magazine published outside of the leading literary centers of Europe was unheard of then, and it is almost as unheard of to-day. But everywhere in America, especially after the change in postal rates, there were these attempts to establish magazines, not only in the half dozen minor cities, but in villages of scarcely more than a half dozen houses. It would have chagrined very much the writers of those mammoth epics to know that the distinctive national voice they were trying in vain to produce was at that moment being heard in half a hundred places in America, and that nobody recognized it as such. Even to-day, people do not seem to consider how remarkable it was. These nameless pioneers of letters setting up their printing presses in the wilderness, sometimes before the little clearings they had fenced in were connected with the main roads of travel to and from the cities, deserve our admiration and gratitude as much as do those pioneers who swung the first axes. Some of those little clusters of houses were trying to support a magazine before they had a post office. What do you think of that for indomitable ambition!

Yes, one after the other, they all failed. But there were so many that it actually amounted to a continuous performance. It was like a torch race. A runner runs with a lighted torch in hand, and before his pace begins to flag he gives it to another, and he to another, and so on until the race is finished. There are many runners, but there is only one torch, and however spent and breathless the runners may become the torch keeps on burning steadily until the race is won. But with this real torch race there were no relays deliberately stationed to relieve one another, and there was a new torch every time. The old runner could go no further and the oil in his torch was spent. But just as he dropped exhausted another runner started up with new untaxed vigor and a new torch with a fresh supply of oil. But always the fire was the same and the light was kept burning. No single runner lasted to see it but this light traveled on until it girdled the whole of America.

From Vermont to South Carolina it traveled, down the mountains, over the plains, and up the mountains again. If you should look on a very big map you might spy Fairhaven, Vermont. How much tinier do you suppose it was just after the Revolution? Yet it lit and flourished a torch. Near by, as you go comfortably now on a train, but then an untrodden wilderness away, was Middleburg. This is a college town now, but then there were only "a number of gentlemen"; they didn't tell us their names but they lit a torch. Over the trail to the east was another village perched in the mountains, Walpole, New Hampshire. Here too a torch was lit; and the magazine grew so popular for a time that the town had to supply a special mail bag to start it on its lengthy lonesome journey as far as Novia Scotia one way and Georgia the other. (The postmaster was very proud of it but he couldn't help grumbling a bit at the extra work!) Down in level New Jersey, in hamlets so small they have since disappeared, up started two more torches when those in Massachusetts and Connecticut had dropped in their spent runners' hands. When these new lights were flickering out Lancaster, Pennsylvania snatched the fire. Just over the State frontier but connected then only by a dirt road zigzagging through stretches of uninhabited country was Frederick Town, Maryland. Here too was a torch. And so on ran the line of lights, a long chain flashing through the wilderness.

It was wonderful enough to attempt magazines year after year undaunted by failure in the three big cities. More wonderful still was it for New Haven, Hartford, Worcester, Richmond, Charleston and Baltimore (where who should be the runner but a lady, as full of pluck as laughter, and she outdistanced many of the men!). All these were cities of much smaller size—even to-day it would be thought a rash undertaking for them to try to put out a magazine; yet to get the few hundred subscribers who would have supported them was an unmeasurably greater task than to get the same number of thousands now. But sometimes it seems to us that these dozens of visionary villages, flourishing aloft if only for a moment their lighted torches, did the most extraordinary and praiseworthy thing in the whole story of American literature.

The period just after the Revolution is falsely called the barren period in our literary history. It showed abundantly the steady growth, generally unnoticed then and not enough remembered now, which was by and by to blossom into famous names.